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ABSTRACT

In the traditional family preservation model, a family's integrity is preserved by keeping children in the care of their immediate or extended families. Family reunification has involved safely returning children to the custody of their families after a period of foster care. However, families are not preserved solely by family members maintaining close physical proximity to their members. Most families develop strong emotional and kinship bonds that perpetuate the history and culture of the family. Therefore, when rethinking the concept of family preservation services, it is useful to think in terms of activities that protect a family's history and culture; preserve its familial, cultural, and ethnic identity and connections; and safeguard the kinship bonds between children and their "psychological family" and culture of origin. In this context, a child's removal and placement into another family can be an effort to preserve the family, as is the case in coparenting. Coparenting involves planned and focused activities to create a parenting partnership in which the child's family and the foster family share a commitment to ensure the well-being of the child while preserving the child's emotional connections to family and culture. Coparenting is well-suited for facilitating family restorations, overcoming barriers of cross-race and cross-cultural placements, responding to child neglect, and preparing a child for permanent placement with another family. (MM)

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"THOUGHTS" ABOUT

PRESERVING AND EMPOWERING FAMILIES

THROUGH CO-PARENTING PARTNERSHIPS

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Illinois Department of
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"THOUGHTS" ABOUT PRESERVING AND EMPOWERING FAMILIES THROUGH CO-PARENTING PARTNERSHIPS

Much has been thought, said, written and passed around by child welfare professionals in recent years about the need to preserve and reunite families. Preserve families? Reunite them? Just what does that mean? In our traditional view, it means keeping family members, especially children, physically together and in "their own homes." Within that context, when it is necessary to remove a child and place him/her somewhere else, we dejectedly chalk up yet another <u>failure</u> in our quest to preserve a family. Once a child is removed, in fact, the family, in our minds at least, takes on a new identity ... it is no longer "intact." By virtue of its "dismemberment," it becomes a "placement family" ... now eligible for "reunification" services.

The fact that we view the physical distancing that results when family members, especially children, are placed outside the "home" with the disintegration of the family itself, is, of course, not a figment of our imagination. The two <u>do</u> seem to go together. The erosion of the family as a functional psychological/ecological unit that so often occurs when a child is placed, however, may be more a function of our own "thoughts and notions" about what makes and sustains a family than anything else. It would not, however, be all that difficult to "reframe" our own mind-sets ... to develop a broader, more holistic and empowering sensitivity to families ... to think of preserving them in a different way.

AN ECOLOGICAL, HOLISTIC VIEW

Traditionally, nuclear and extended families have been charged with the primary responsibility of preparing society's children for the future. The effect of the family's social-ecological system on the well-being and ultimate developmental and life outcomes of its children, is second to none. It is primarily through family inclusion and participation that children develop a sense of family, gender, ethnic, cultural, national and spiritual identity ... and learn to participate in and contribute to the history and culture of their own family and society. Both individually and collectively, families hold the key to society's future.

While the "psychological" family and its "culture" is the child's primary and most influential environment, neighborhoods and local communities constitute the child's **next** most influential environment and the primary environment of their families. Neighborhoods and communities, too, have unique characteristics and identities, influenced by the ethnic, cultural, political, national, economic and perhaps religious make-up of their members. **As we envision an ecological perspective, we begin to see a series of <u>interactive</u> concentric circles**, with the child at the center, surrounded by his/her immediate and extended family along with their tribal/ethnic/cultural extensions, their neighborhood and the larger community in which they live, their "state" and their nation, and finally, the more nebulous multi-cultural larger society ... **each exerting influence over, and having responsibility for, the well-being and ultimate outcomes of the next circle in.** Not only do children have influential psychological families of origin, they have influential cultures of origin as well.

REFRAMING OUR "THOUGHTS AND NOTIONS"

Reframing? What's that?

"Reframing" has to do with changing one's perspective. In therapeutic circles, it generally refers to taking something that is typically viewed as a negative or deficit, turning it upside down and around, and redefining it as a positive or strength. In other words, "reframing" is "making lemonade." In more general terms, it is thought of as a process by which one views things from another angle ... gains a different perspective ... acquires new insights ... creates a fresh vision.

The traditional <u>family preservation</u> model has held that our success in maintaining the integrity of the family is measured by our ability to safely maintain children in their own homes, protected from risk of harm, in the care of their immediate and/or extended families. Likewise, <u>family reunification</u> has been looked upon as safely returning children to the care, custody and control of their families following a period of placement which is generally, but not always, precipitated by the belief that they would be at "risk of harm" if allowed to remain at home.

Families are not "preserved" solely by maintaining the close physical proximity of their members, however. Most families develop their own unique characteristics and infrastructures (systems, boundaries, roles, interaction patterns, etc.) which are both intra- and inter-generational. In addition, they are capable of developing strong emotional kinship/tribal bonds ... bonds that ultimately both create and perpetuate the history and culture of the family itself. One cannot develop a sense of family and cultural identity, however, without the presence and interaction of other members of the family... without the infra-structure attachments and relationships that result in a sense of familial, cultural and ethnic "belonging." It is the presence of

that essential sense of "connectedness" over an extended period of the child's development that allows the child to become a participant member of his/her own **"psychological family and culture of origin"** ... to develop a meaningful identity ... to "belong" in a vitally important way. It is these very connections that ensure the development of the kinship/tribal bonds that transcend time and space ... the intra- and inter-generational "connectedness" that binds families together and allows adult members to maintain their identity and "place" within the on-going history and culture of their own families of origin even as they become adults, physically distanced from parents and siblings.

When a child is removed from his/her own family and placed into another ecological family system (i.e. a foster family), important connections to and with the original family are easily distorted or lost unless every effort is made to protect family kinship/tribal bonds ... to reinforce positive emotional attachments and partnerships ... and to preserve the child's identity with his or her family and culture. Only when important tribal/kinship bonds have significantly eroded and/or family attachments and relationships have disengaged ... and there is hope for a positive reconnection ... might we think in terms of family reunification. [We should recognize, of course, that close physical proximity does not guarantee family "connectedness;" it is quite possible for a family to become detached and disconnected even when its members remain together.]

As we attempt to reframe our "thoughts and notions" about <u>family preservation services</u>, we might find ourselves thinking in terms of planned and focused activities intended to maintain and strengthen the integrity of the family by protecting its history and culture, preserving its familial, cultural and ethnic identity and connections, and safeguarding the kinship/tribal bonds between the child and his or her **"psychological family and**

culture of origin," especially during times when it is necessary to place a child into another family's ecosystem.

Likewise, it would follow that we might begin thinking of <u>family reunification services</u> as planned and purposeful activities intended to restore kinship and cultural bonds, reconnect and strengthen lost or distorted familial, cultural and ethnic attachments and identities, and to enable the family to build or rebuild a healthy, inclusive familial/cultural infrastructure. **Perhaps thinking of "family restoration" would be more apropos.**

Taking our "reframing" exercise one step further within an ecological framework, we might view a child's removal and placement into another family's system NOT as a failure to preserve the family, but rather the beginning of an intensified effort to preserve it ... a challenge to maintain the integrity of the child's familial, cultural and ethnic connections ... to preserve the child's "place" and positive identity with his/her primary family and culture. But how do we accomplish that when it is necessary to physically remove a child from his/her family?

"THOUGHTS" ABOUT CO-PARENTING PARTNERSHIPS

Over the past several decades, there has evolved a more or less typical foster care scenario. When it is determined that a child's health, safety and well-being cannot be assured at home, a "placement" occurs. The child's parents do not typically participate in the process and, all too often, are not told where or with whom their child is living. Parenting responsibilities and activities are transferred to the foster parents, thereby disengaging the developmentally significant parent-child partnership that has hopefully evolved. Likewise, the child's emotional attachments and family connections are disrupted. The longer the out-of-home placement, the greater and more lasting the damage. Familial, cultural and ethnic connections erode and eventually

disconnect as the child's sense of identity and worth become distorted. More often than not, as the child's family members become distanced and disenfranchised by the process, they too disconnect and disengage ... and in the process become disempowered. **The all too familiar outcome of the "typical" scenario is that successful reintegration of the child into a "detached" and disconnected family becomes difficult, if not impossible.** Even if the child is returned, family connections and attachments may be damaged beyond repair. At best, some children become marginally attached "quasi-family members," their developmental and ultimate adult outcomes adversely and permanently effected. **A more outcome-desirable alternative would be to preserve the child's ties to his/her family and culture, especially during times of physical separation, by protecting and strengthening the child's familial, cultural and ethnic "connectedness."**

Within this broadened ecological view of family preservation, co-parenting provides a viable option for preserving family and cultural connections. **Co-parenting is a dynamic, holistic process in which the "host" (foster) family becomes an extension of, rather than replacement for, the child's "psychological family and culture of origin" ... a supportive and empowering enhancement of the primary family's social-cultural ecosystem.**

More specifically, one might say that **co-parenting involves planned and focused activities intended to create a dynamic parenting partnership** in which the child's own family and his/her "host" (foster) family share a joint commitment and mutual agenda to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the child **while preserving and strengthening the child's emotional "connectedness" to and identity with his/her own family and culture,** both during periods of separation and placement AND, perhaps, after the child's return home.

Shared-parenting partnerships may include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

--- The "host" family welcomes and encourages the participation of the child's family in the placement process, thereby sanctioning the arrangement for the child;

--- The agency, along with the child's family and his/her "host" family, facilitates the development and continuation of a three-way partnership aimed at ensuring the health, safety and well-being of the child;

--- With agency support, the "host" family supports the child and his/her immediate and extended family members in maintaining their familial, cultural and ethnic connections; encourages and enables the family to maintain a positive presence in the child's life and to participate in appropriate parenting activities (i.e. enrolling the child in school, shopping for school clothes, attending school functions and conferences, taking the child for his/her annual medical/dental exams and any recommended follow-up treatment, including the child as a family participant in familial/cultural/ethnic/religious activities that are a part of the family's history and culture, etc.);

--- The "host" family, in conjunction with others, enables the child's family to increase their competence and expand their capacity for successful parenting through skill-building, enabling and empowering activities; serves as an active mentor for the family;

--- The "host" family facilitates and participates in cooperative problem-solving by and with the child's family, thereby validating the importance of their role; enables and empowers the child's family to ensure the well-being and "best interests" of their own children;

--- The "host" family, when appropriate, provides transportation and other supportive services to encourage appropriate

parent-child activities and to reinforce positive parenting during the time the child is living with the "host" family;

--- **Upon the child's return home, the "host" family continues to be available to the child and his/her family as part of an enabling and empowering support system** ... akin to creating an extended family for whose who lack a viable social support system or who can benefit from an expanded supportive network; and

--- **When adoptive placement is in the child's best interest, supports efforts to enable and empower the child's family to become active and supportive partners in the development and implementation of a plan to promote the child's healthy growth and development as a member of another family.**

WHAT'S BROKEN? WHAT NEEDS FIXING?

There are several reasons why we should seriously consider reframing our "thoughts and notions" about family preservation and give serious thought to the merits of successful co-parenting partnerships.

For starters, co-parenting is empowering to families. Taking a child away from his/her family sends a strong message of failure and disapproval to the family. After all, parents, especially mothers, are **suppose to** be able to care for their young, and the inability to do so carries heavy social and emotional penalties. Unfortunately, the erosion of self-esteem that nearly always accompanies the involuntary removal of a child is exacerbated by agency practices that render parents powerless, especially at the point of placement. Once children perceive that a parent is not in charge, it is difficult for them to ever again trust the parent's ability to protect and take care of them. Likewise,

parental self-confidence is eroded through persistent practices that further disempower already disenfranchised families.

When a child is placed, nearly all fundamental parenting responsibilities are transferred to the foster family, to be carried out within their ecological family system. **The parents are not only left powerless ... they are left without knowledge of or influence over even the most basic aspects of their own child's life.** Their parenting role no longer exists as such ... they are "cut out of the parenting loop," so to speak. [This is, incidentally, about the time we program them for "parenting classes" ... an illustration of our sometimes professional insensitivity and lack of practicality.] **Co-parenting, on the other hand, embodies the notion of sharing, not transferring, power and responsibility; it embraces the idea of encouraging and enabling parents and extended family members to actively participate in the lives of their children** ... to stay "connected." As a result, motivation for the child's return can more easily be sustained, thus reducing the likelihood of ambivalence born of inadvertent, yet real, emotional and physical distancing.

Likewise, **co-parenting allows the kinship/tribal bonds that are so essential to the development of familial/cultural identity to be maintained** through the continuation of important emotional attachments, relationships and connections with the child's family and culture. Moreover, **families who become emotionally disengaged from their young are far less likely to feel a continued sense of responsibility for them than those who stay connected. As a result, the process of moving children back into their own homes is made less difficult because the family remains emotionally "connected" and responsible for its children.**

Additionally, co-parenting reduces the internal conflict that typically besieges most children who are placed in traditional foster care. When their psychological families and their foster families are placed in competitive, or even adversarial, rather

than in complementary roles, children are bound to suffer because it becomes difficult to love either family without conflict and guilt. Having no one to love ... being unable to express affection freely and spontaneously ... creates as much of an emotional burden for a child as almost anything else. Shared parenting around mutual agendas and concern for the child ... **parenting in tandem ... gives the child permission to love, and be loved by, both families in a complementary, albeit different, fashion.**

WHEN MIGHT CO-PARENTING BE APPROPRIATE?

It might be easier to think of circumstances in which co-parenting would be clearly inappropriate. There are, of course, those situations. Nevertheless, the following examples are illustrative of those that might be particularly well suited to co-parenting:

--- **Facilitating Family "Restorations:"** The preponderance of children who are removed from their own homes are placed with the hope and expectation that they will be able to return home ... that the family as a viable, operational unit can be restored. Co-parenting can provide a viable method of facilitating and supporting that process by enabling the family to remain psychologically "intact" and "connected" during periods of separation.

--- **Overcoming the Barriers of Cross-Race/Cultural Placements:** It is not always possible for agencies and courts to have an adequate supply of same-race placements to ensure that racial/cultural identity can be maintained through a period of out-of-home care. When an appropriate same-race placement cannot be made, co-parenting partnerships can provide a means by which the child's racial/ethnic/cultural "connectedness" can be sustained. When kinship/tribal bonds are maintained ... when emotional attachments and relationships

are nurtured and encouraged to grow ... when families are supported in their efforts to include the child as an active participant in the celebrations, activities and rituals of the family's culture, the child's positive identity with that culture is less likely to become distorted.

--- **Responding to Chronic Neglect ... Long-term Care by Plan:** The dilemma of chronic neglect poses unique challenges to most child welfare agencies. Generally we think of chronic neglect as resulting from: (1) the willful and wanton disregard of a child by the primary caregiver, (2) the existence of overwhelmingly adverse environmental conditions, and (3) those situations in which the needs of the child consistently exceed the capacity of the parent. It is this latter group that seems to present the greatest challenge.

When the needs of the child exceed the capacity of the parent on a regular and routine basis, either because of the unusual needs of the child or the limitations of the parent, or both, we often see few options. We can, through the provision of skill-building and enabling services, expand the capacity of the parents, and then supplement their optimal level of care with concrete and supportive services as long as children remain in the home. If that is not a viable option, we can remove the children and, after a respectable period of time, begin the process of terminating their parent's legal rights in the hope ensuring "permanency" through adoption. This latter option, however, is often exercised without regard for the child's kinship/tribal bonds or the importance of his/her familial/cultural attachments. Some children who are forced to disengage from an ineffective, yet closely bonded and attached family, are never able to form satisfactory attachments with another family. In such cases, long-term co-

parenting, by plan and agreement, might well be a preferable option.

--- **Preparing a Child for Permanent Placement with Another Family:** There are times when the kinship bonds and familial attachments are fragmented beyond repair or the family infrastructure is too damaged to be restored. There are also times when the parents are simply unable or unwilling to maintain healthy, viable familial/kinship connections ... to support and promote the child's healthy growth and development through an on-going co-parenting arrangement. In other words the child's "best interests" dictate sanctioning the de facto detachment that has already occurred so that planning for permanent placement with an adoptive family can move forward. Through an effective and supportive agency/co-parenting partnership, some parents may be helped to assess their own **readiness** for parenting and determine that they are, in fact, not at a point in their lives when they are in a position to take on responsibility for the child(ren) in question. Coming to terms with that reality does not, however, need to be emotionally and socially devastating.

Through a supportive, positive partnership, some parents may be able to voluntarily relinquish their children for adoption and, through a positive process of doing so, be left **"whole"** ... **empowered** to ensure the "best interests" of their own children by being an active participant in the development of a plan to ensure permanent parenting by another (adoptive) family. Court proceedings to terminate parental rights are laden with public airings of parental failure and incompetence. The erosion of self-confidence can be so permanent and the devastating effects of "labeling" so powerful, that some parents are simply precluded from successfully parenting other children. Likewise, children who are legally freed for adoption through a

typical adversarial termination proceeding receive a potent message concerning the worth and value of their own families (and sometimes cultures) of origin ... and themselves. Empowering families to voluntarily relinquish their parental rights and responsibilities by giving them the support and approval they need to do so, can enable them, and their children, to survive an otherwise devastating experience with a minimum of additional emotional damage ... certainly a more humane and caring approach.

Under optimal conditions, some parents, with the support and encouragement of the agency and their "host" family partners, might even be able to actively participate in the preparation of their own children for adoptive placement. Permission and encouragement from these two families to "move on" ... to form new and positive attachments with yet another family ... can be powerful facilitators at a time when forming new relationships is critical to adoptive success. Bringing the adoptive family into the partnership might further facilitate the process by creating a positive environment in which the family of origin is empowered to "give over" the child to a new family ... one who is likewise empowered to welcome and "receive" him. When a singular agenda can be negotiated and maintained, the participants are more likely to remain "whole."

WHAT IF WE WERE TO "MONKEY-AROUND" WITH THIS BASIC NOTION? .... EXPAND IT? .... CREATE "HYBRIDS"?

Once we have incorporated a "reframed" notion of family preservation and restoration into our thinking, we will be able to move on to create endless adaptations of the theme. For example, co-parenting, as discussed above, implies "placement" as a prerequisite. But .... what if we were to modify the fundamental

family preservation via co-parenting notion so as to enhance our efforts to strengthen those families who are struggling to stay together and stay "connected?" What might **that** look like?

Those of us who work with families of children who are abused and/or neglected, and can find the time to peruse the literature, will find ample validation of something we already know ... that social isolation resulting from the inability to connect with and benefit from consistent supportive social/familial networks is an important contributor to poor family well-being outcomes. If, then, we think it makes good sense to offer expanded opportunities for isolated families to experience the benefits of social interaction and support, we might want to "monkey around" a bit with the co-parenting idea. For instance, what if we were to develop **neighborhood/community "resource" families**? They could be recruited, trained and prepared to become resource/support "partners" ... mentors, enablers, allies, coaches, mutual problem-solvers and the like ... to and with struggling families in their own communities. The "resource family" might well join the family-agency partnership as part of a supportive local network ... a vital transitional link between the agency and the neighborhood and/or community where the family actually lives.

A single "resource family" might be able to connect with several different families at the same time. In addition to becoming supportive and enabling neighborhood/community "anchors," they could also provide short term child care in **their** homes for the children of their partnership families in order to provide much needed ... sometimes absolutely essential ... respite. There is nothing like a weekend, or even just an evening, of privacy and freedom from the on-going demands of child care to "refuel" an exhausted and overwhelmed parent.

Taking the idea another step, specially recruited, trained and prepared "resource moms" in local neighborhoods could provide support and information to teen parents struggling with issues

around child care and development, again creating an on-going local resource and support base close to home. There are a variety of ways to utilize indigenous talent in building family-based services within neighborhoods and communities, thereby increasing local "ownership" in and responsibility for family well-being outcomes. There are no doubt countless other innovative ways of supporting, preserving and even restoring the "nuts and bolts" of families when we think of them as they really are ... as abstract, rather than concrete, psychological, rather than physical, ecosystems.

COULD IT BE?

Could it be that re-framing many of our fundamental notions about child and family well-being, and the practices that evolve from them, might hold greater promise for tomorrow's children and their families? Could it be that programs that are based on enabling and skill-building partnerships will be found to be more empowering and emancipating than the deficit-based practices which we have clearly found to be disabling? Could it be that more children could be returned home, sooner and healthier, and have a greater chance of remaining there, if we were to re-frame our thoughts and notions about family preservation and restoration? ... if we were to consider creative ways of strengthening the family's capacity to insure the well-being and "best interests" of their own children through family enhancement approaches such as co-parenting? Might it be that co-parenting partnerships could actually facilitate the adoptive process and strengthen the chances for positive attachments with a new family? Or that a hybrid of the co-parenting idea might be used to create neighborhood family resource and support networks as well as much needed respite for families who periodically just need a break from it all. Think about it.